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COMMUNION WITH GOD IN THE BIBLE

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III. IN THE BOOK OF PSALMS

In the first two articles of this series we saw the difficulties of illustrating the idea of Communion with God on the basis of the prophetic and historical books of the Old Testament. The prophets, speaking as they do to men for God rather than to God for men, seldom let us look directly into their inner experience. The figures that move before us on the pages of the historical books are presented rather in their public than in their private relationships. They are national figures and we are told rather what they did than what they were. In the Psalms, however, we have, in its simplest and most natural form, the thing of which we are in search. There men have poured out their hot hearts to God. Heights of joy, depths of penitence and anguish, resolution and failure, thanksgiving and confession, every experience of the soul is here anticipated, expressed, and, above all, related to God, in whom alone the weak found their refuge and strength, and in whose light men saw the mysteries of human life, if not with perfect clearness, yet clearly enough to fill their hearts with quietness and confidence. Johann Arndt, the German mystic, well said: "What the heart is in man, that is the Psalter in the Bible." Here are the prayers that teach us to pray, the songs on which men and nations have modeled their praises, the confessions that inspire and express our penitence. In the Hebrew Psalter the human spirit, in all the checkered possibilities of its experience, lies in the presence of its God. There is no mood, whether of sorrow, struggle, or triumph, which does not here find its reflex and expression. The range of its sympathy has made it the comfort of men in persecution, their inspiration in the struggle with foes within and without, the hope and stay of their dying hours.

Here, however, as everywhere in the Old Testament, problems many and difficult arise, which have to be faced and appreciated

before we can move over the ground with any real confidence. Of these we shall mention only two—those affecting (1) the speaker in the Psalms, and (2) their historic origin.

1. It is natural to suppose that the speaker, when he calls himself "I" or "me," is an individual. Obviously, however, this cannot always be the case. In Ps. 129:1, for example,

Much have they afflicted *me* from my youth up,
Let *Israel* now say,

the reference must necessarily be a national or collective one. Smend, in his famous essay twenty-one years ago in the *Zeitschrift für die alt-testamentliche Wissenschaft*, "On the 'I' in the Psalms," sought to carry this interpretation practically throughout the whole Psalter. Since then the pendulum has swung, notably in the commentary of Duhm, to the other extreme. It could not be justly argued that this is altogether a question of no importance, for sometimes the difference in the resultant interpretation will be profound, according as we believe the speaker to be an individual or the nation. Take, for example, the great confession of faith toward the close of the sixteenth psalm:

Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol,
Neither wilt Thou suffer Thy loving one to see the pit.

Even on the individual interpretation, the meaning is not beyond doubt. The speaker may be expressing his confidence in his recovery from a severe illness—though this seems too meager a meaning for the large drift of the psalm—but it is quite possible that he is expressing his faith in a life beyond the grave. On the collective interpretation, nothing more would be implied than faith in the continued existence of Israel. It is all the difference between national and individual immortality, and therefore the question of the "I" cannot be said to be unimportant. At the same time it would be easy to exaggerate its importance. A psalm, though sung by the church, is at any rate written by an individual, and in the first instance expresses *his* feelings and faith; indeed it must do that before it can express theirs. So from this point of view, the question of who the speaker is does not greatly matter; least of all when we remember that though, in post-exilic times, the corporate ecclesiastical consciousness was keen, so also was the individual consciousness, and consequently the individual interpretation of the Psalms cannot in any case be

greatly wide of the mark. The penitence, for example, which a psalm expresses must first have been experienced by the individual conscience before it took the form of a psalm to be sung by the united church.

2. Again, it is hardly ever possible to ascertain, with any precision, the origin and authorship of a psalm. Often we may feel sure that it was born out of a very definite historical situation; but in the long course of a history of which we know so comparatively little as that of Israel, many possibilities present themselves, and we have to be content with conjectures of more or less probability. Psalms 44 and 79, for example, are a vivid transcript of a dreadful experience—when the temple was defiled, the city in ruins, the blood of the saints poured out like water, the dead exposed to beasts and birds. Most scholars assign these psalms to the awful days of Antiochus Epiphanes, but even this is not certain. The very uncertainty of the historical origin of the psalms is, however, while in some ways to be regretted, in other ways a gain. It lifts them into a region of universal applicability. Like all true lyric poetry, the Psalms seize the essential element in a situation, dropping all that is adventitious; therefore, though they seldom throw any light upon the history, they are immortal revelations of the human spirit in its most sincere and searching experiences; and it is partly to the fact that they are so rarely specific in the historical sense that they owe their undying power. Where they are specific they have naturally been most appreciated by those whose historical situation was like that of the writers and earliest singers. We can imagine, for example, the power of Ps. 76, sung by the Scottish covenanters before a battle, as described by Scott in *Old Mortality*:

When thy rebuke, O Jacob's God,
Had forth against them past,
Their horses and their chariots both
Were in a deep sleep cast.

The people of the Reformation, too, must have felt the thrill of many a psalm, as we can hardly do in these less stirring times. But where the psalmists speak from the level of life's average struggles and sorrows, they appeal to the universal heart.

The Hebrew name for the Psalter is the Book of Praises. Throughout it, with hardly an exception, there is an undertone of either hope

or praise; and some of its noblest songs are altogether songs of praise. At the same time, the Hebrew life which forms the background of the Psalter and against which the glorious fact of God stands out so radiantly, was, for the most part, a life of conflict and pain. Many of the psalmists were men of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Behind and before they are beset by enemies, whose dark presence is felt even in the quietest and most trustful psalms (cf. Ps. 23). Through those enemies the heart of the psalmists was often made sore, and their life was sometimes in peril. The enemies are men of violence and arrogance, with cunning dispositions, sharp tongues, and sometimes swords as sharp. To the psalmists, both the commoner and the rarer tragedies of life are familiar. They know the pang of kindness rejected and friendship betrayed (41:9; 55:12-14). They know the vanity of human help. They have faced, though with faith and good hope, the mystery of life, and felt it at times to be fleeting and empty, like a breath or a phantom (39:5, 6), frail as a dream or a wild flower (Ps. 90). The writer of Ps. 90, that great hymn of eternity, was profoundly impressed by the pathos of it all—the inexorable passing of the generations, the blight of sin, the going down to the grave with one's work unaccomplished. To him life seems ruthlessly swept away by the uncontrollable floods of time. It is like a sleep; like a bird that flies away and is seen no more; like a sigh, brief and lost forever, wrung from a heavily laden heart. At the end of it lies the grave, where, for many of the psalmists, there is no more remembrance of God, and they can give him no more thanks forever.

So whether we consider the inherent pathos and frailty of life, or the fierceness with which it is assailed by foes from without, it is to most of the psalmists a valley of deep shadow, though the gloom is pierced by a mild yet steady light, which sometimes shines so brightly as to chase it all away. But often the shadow is very deep indeed.

My life is spent with sorrow,
And my years with sighing (31:10)—

that is the burden of many a psalmist's song. "Many are they that rise up against me" (3:1). It is tear-stained faces that look in the night for the joy that cometh in the morning (30:5). Sometimes the

writers grow hot and indignant at the unexplained anomalies of the moral world, sometimes they are driven by them into temporary skepticism, so that their feet had almost gone, and their steps had well-nigh slipped (73:2).

But more real even than these facts that distress and vex them is the infinite fact of God. They are at the worst but temporary; but he was before them and he will be after them. They perish, but he endures, ever the same, and his years know no end. And no great impersonal force is he, but a Father who pities his children (103:13), a Friend who loves and listens to his human friends. We are so familiar with the language of the Psalms that it is hard for us to realize the wonder of it, the naturalness, the passion, the naïveté, we had almost said, with which they appeal to him to help them, to arise, to awake for them, to hide them, and to watch over them.

Forsake me not, O Jehovah:

O my God, be not far from me (38:21).

They are persons, so is He. "*Thou art with me*" (23:4). Here, and everywhere throughout the Psalter, two persons face each other—the divine and the human; and this living sense of the personality of God is the sublime glory of the Psalter. He is as real to those who trust him as the mountains that are round about Jerusalem (125:2), only more stable and mighty than they. They might be torn up by the roots and flung into the sea, but he would even then be a refuge (46:1 f.), inspiring his people with a strength and a calmness like his own.

This fact of God and of his reality to the psalmists, familiar as it is, sometimes comes upon the reader with overwhelming power; and to the man who passionately believes it every situation is by it transformed. Take, for example, Ps. 11. There the situation is desperate enough. Society is being shaken to its foundations, its pillars are trembling, the best are despondent or despairing. The worst are working untrammelled their cruel will, and flight seems the only wisdom. But there is one brave, strong man who amid the confusion and despair stands firm as a rock. He sees the danger, but he also sees his God. From the danger on earth he lifts up his eyes to the heavens, to Jehovah, who from his throne is carefully watching it all, and who will one day punish the wicked, and reward

the good with a vision of his gracious face. Or take Ps. 91, that most daring expression of optimism in the Psalter. To its writer the world was thick-set with perils, peopled by demons who haunted every hour of the day and night, by forces that smote men down by the thousand and ten thousand. Upon its roads were stones over which the weary pilgrim feet might stumble; in its secret places lurked serpents and wild beasts. But the eye of faith sees angels to match the demons—angels who gently lift the pilgrim over the rough places of the way; and above all, the Psalmist sees very plainly one of whom he can say, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.” Sometimes indeed through their blinding tears the psalmists cannot see God (73:13), but in happier moods, and sometimes even in their sorrow, they feel themselves overwhelmed by a sense of that justice and goodness of God, which are all the the day. Indeed, nothing in the universe is so stupendous as these facts, which are comparable only to the mightiest things in the world—the mountains and the great sea.

O Jehovah, thy love is in the heavens,
 Thy faithfulness reacheth to the skies,
 Thy righteousness is like the mountains of God,
 Thy judgments are a great deep (36:5 f.).

The whole earth is full of the loving kindness of Jehovah (33:5), and if one would learn how good he is, one has only to taste and see (34:8).

Such then is the God to whom the psalmists pray; and so real, so personal is he, that their address to him never meanders into abstractions, it has all the glow and color of a passionate personal relationship. The psalmists are not so much concerned to assert that God is everywhere, but that he is *here*—not only with the world at large, but with *them* and where *they* are. “God with *us*”—that is their motto. Yet surely no one ever thought of God in his larger relationships more impressively than they. They were overwhelmed, as completely as any man has ever been, by the thought of God’s infinity, of his eternity, of his omnipresence; but they have the genius to express these thoughts in language that falls within the comprehension of a little child. They show him sitting as King at the Flood, and sitting as King forever (29:10) as enduring when

the heavens are no more (102:26), as existing from the unthinkable past, on through the life of mountains and men, to the unimaginable future (Ps. 90). They do not say that he is omnipresent, but they say with a more convincing simplicity that there is no place in which we can escape his spirit, or evade his presence—that high in heaven, or deep in Sheol, or far away in the uttermost parts of the sea, he is there (139:7-9).

Anywhere, then, it will be possible for the devout soul to commune with such a God. All nature is the work of his hand, and a shining symbol of his presence. The psalmists "see him," as Fr. Naumann has said, "come over the mountains—in the snow, in the rain, in the sunshine." The starry sky (Ps. 8), the splendid sun (Ps. 19), the great wide sea (104:25), the bubbling fountains, the grassy fields, the stately trees (104:10-17)—in the presence of these things the psalmists feel that they are in his own presence. Yet there is a nearer fellowship than that. At best those things but declare his glory (19:1), but not his will for men. That is revealed for them in two ways apart from the revelation that came to them in the musings of their own hearts, namely, in history and in Scripture. On the field of history the mysterious purpose of God may be learned—that purpose which in its essence is love (Ps. 136), though human obstinacy has often compelled it to show itself as severity. It is because God is present in history that faith can reinforce itself by thinking of the days of old (143:5), and the sense of God and his goodness is kept alive partly by the tradition that passes on through the ages from father to son.

We have heard with our ears, O God,
Our fathers have told us
What work thou didst in their days,
In the days of old (44:1, cf. 48:13).

But the divine will which was written in letters of fire on the pages of history, was written more gently but not less plainly in Scripture, which embraced certainly the Pentateuch, possibly also parts of the historical and prophetic books. This was God's unique gift to Israel (147:19 f.) and its praises are sung in language of quiet rapture (Ps. 119; 119:7-11).

In Jerusalem, which was regarded as, in a special sense, Jehovah's

earthly home, "the city of the great King" (48:2), and more particularly in the temple, did the true Jew feel himself to be peculiarly near his God. Specially blessed were those who dwelt in his house and praised him evermore (84:4): it is there that they behold the beauty of Jehovah (27:4), and their hearts fill with simple joy when someone proposes a pilgrimage to the holy city, to take part in the stately worship of the temple they loved so well (Ps. 122). Naturally, communion with God, besides being sustained in these ways—by the contemplation of nature, by meditation upon history, by the study of Scripture, and by participation in public worship—was sustained most powerfully of all by prayer. Besides the express testimony of 55:17, that prayer was offered three times a day, the whole Psalter is an eloquent testimony to the place and power of prayer in the life of the devout Hebrew.

Communion with God, while it may be realized with special vividness in sorrow—for he "healeth the broken in heart and bindeth up their wounds" (147:3)—is interrupted by sin. Unforgiven sin creates a paralyzing feeling of condemnation and prostration (130:3; 143:2), and there can be no health or happiness for the soul until sin is sincerely confessed. Then God, who has both the will and the power to redeem (130:7 f.), will compass the penitent about with forgiveness and love (Ps. 32), and the old glad relationship will be restored.

With such a God to worship—one who, though Lord of the heavens and the earth, yet enters with his power and pity into the experiences of the individual soul—the passion of the Psalter is very explicable. Its writers long for him as the hart pants for the water-brooks, and when he seems to stand afar off, it is as if the light of the world had gone out. But their hearts are never long without a witness to him. Even when he seems to have forsaken them (22:1), it is *he* who has forsaken them. He is still somewhere, the great unshaken Fact, the patient and affectionate Person, who in his own way, which is not our way, and in his own time, which is not our time, will deliver his poor servant out of the jaws of the ravening and roaring lion. Under the shadow of his wings those who trust him may rest with quietness and confidence, in the assurance that his tender mercies are over all his works.

With quietness and confidence: for the lesson taught by Isaiah (30:15) and rejected with derision by his contemporaries, had at length sunk deep into the Hebrew mind. It is beautiful to watch the sublime confidence with which men commit their spirits into the divine hands (31:5) and though beset by dangers lie quietly down in sleep, with the assurance that their God will sustain them (3:5; 4:8). The power of the presence of God to drive out fear—illustrated already in the experience of the prophets and of Israel's great historical figures—is confirmed by many a word of the Psalter.

In God have I put my trust, I will not be afraid;
What can flesh do unto me? (56:4).

Jehovah is on my side; I will not fear;
What can man do unto me? (118:6)

And in ever-memorable words:

Though I walk through the valley of the deep shadow,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me (23:4).

Therefore over even a very troubled life may brood an atmosphere of sweetest peace. Some expressions of this gentle confidence in God, especially in the group known as the Pilgrim Psalms (Pss. 120–134), are touched with singular beauty. What could be finer, for example, than this:

Unto thee do I lift up mine eyes,
O thou that sittest in the heavens.
Behold, as the eyes of servants to the hand of their master,
As the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
So are our eyes toward Jehovah our God,
Until he have mercy upon us (123:1 f.);

Or this:

Jehovah, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty,
Neither do I exercise myself in great matters,
Or in things too wonderful for me.
Surely I have stilled and quieted my soul,
Like a weaned child with his mother (131:1 f.).

The spirit of devout humility and tender resignation has surely received its final expression in these two brief and beautiful songs. In the same group is a psalm which reminds us that it is not with feverish activity but in silence and with quiet trust that the finest gifts are won and the mightiest things achieved.

It is vain for you to rise up early,
To take rest late,
To eat the bread of toil;
For he giveth to his beloved in sleep (127:2).

With the Old Testament generally, most of the Psalms are limited in their outlook to this world. This explains the materialism, the impatience, the imprecations, the demand for speedy vindication which characterizes not a few of them. But though with their limited outlook upon another world, they are eager and all but clamorous to have their wrongs righted and their cause vindicated in this, and though the blessings for which they pray are often of a material sort, there are many who have mounted to the higher uplands of the spiritual life and whose dearest satisfaction is to have the gracious face of God shining upon them (4:6).

The transition from the one mood to the other receives its most brilliant illustration in Ps. 73. Here is a man who had been provoked and disheartened by the success of wickedness. It was those who denied and defied God that were sleek and prosperous; while he with his clean and scrupulous life had been hurled to the wall. Verily if the service of God brought no better reward than that, it was hardly worth while; and the Psalmist's faith began to slip away from him. But one day the secret of it all was revealed to him—the fearful end of the sinner, and the good man's unbroken fellowship with God. Despite persecution and earthly failure, "As for me, I am *continually* with thee." This is one of the very greatest words of the Old Testament. Another psalmist, vexed by the same problem, had comforted himself with the thought that at death God would take him to himself (49:15). This psalmist's solution is much profounder, for it is not postponed to the world beyond. He finds peace and fellowship on this side of the grave as well as on the other. He, too, believes that at death God will take him; but he is no less sure that, in this world, God is holding him by the right hand, and guiding him across the pilgrimage of life. So, despite all seeming, he is continually with God, God is continually with him. He has nothing but God, but God is everything; and with him—even amid distress and defeat—he is content. Heart and flesh may fail, but God is his portion forever.